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Is it all a question of openness?

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HEADLINE: Is it all a question of openness?

BYLINE: Tan Seow Hon , FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

BODY:

A NEW orthodoxy seems to be emerging among Singapore youth, if recent reactions to the video of the polytechnic student who filmed herself having sex with her boyfriend are anything to go by.

Sex before or outside marriage is no big deal now. These days, some youths also seem to view those who believe pre-marital sex to be a no-no as immature, prejudiced and judgmental.

This is perhaps symptomatic of a more general disdain for the language of right and wrong. For the majority of youths during their hormonally charged years, when they are also subject to peer pressure not to appear old-fashioned, the area in which the disdain for the language of right and wrong has the greatest practical implications might be their immediate lifestyle choices - sexual behaviour in dating, pornography, clubbing habits and the like.

Taking a stand for abstinence outside of marriage tends to be seen as not only prudish but also, increasingly, as an imposition on the views of others.

As an educator, I have noticed how some moral realists - who believe in the objective rightness or wrongness of an act - among my students are frequently apologetic about the views they hold. It is as if they feel they have no right to express these views, whereas those who disbelieve in right and wrong occasionally flaunt their views without defending them.

But why should taking a stand against pre-marital sex be seen as having an unenlightened mind? Is openness to sex a mark of maturity?

Perhaps some might reason that the justification for sex on demand is that it is pleasurable, and we have a right to choose whatever brings us pleasure. Or some others might say that physically intimate behaviour leads to connection among persons and thus is always desirable.

Indeed, decades ago, in his essay entitled *Our Sexual Ethics*, the late Bertrand Russell wrote about how sex was being viewed irrationally in his times. He took the view that 'the question whether (an ethical) code is good or bad is the same as the question whether or not it promotes human happiness'.

Others could say that such a choice should be left to the individual, as no other person is harmed by the act. Interestingly, these arguments turn on the rightness of an entitlement to pleasure or of individual choice.

But note that the supposed value of individual choice may only be extolled in the domain of rightness and wrongness - or morals - precisely that which those advocating choice might think only the immature inhabit. If so, individual choice in sexual ethics is not uncontentious but, indeed, competes in the same realm as other moral values, such as abstinence from sex outside of marriage.

Might there then be a good case for sex as and when an individual feels like it, according to one's instinct? Well, we do not generally live as our instinct dictates - that is in fact what sets us apart from animals.

As the late Cambridge professor C.S. Lewis said: 'When I was a youngster, all the progressive people were saying, 'Why all this prudery? Let us treat sex just as we treat all our other impulses.'...I have since discovered that they meant exactly the opposite.

'They meant that sex was to be treated as no other impulse in our nature has ever been treated by civilised people. All the others, we admit, have to be bridled. Absolute obedience to your instinct for self-preservation is what we call cowardice; to your acquisitive impulse, avarice.'

It is a misnomer of sorts to refer to sex before one gets married as 'pre-marital sex'.

As Italian scholar Dr Fulvio di Blasi argues, everyone knows that in real life there is usually no connection between marital and pre-marital sex. The term 'pre-marital sex', oddly enough, tends to play on the concept of marriage, which still has a strong positive moral connotation. Perhaps, it confers some of the same moral connotation upon a non-marital relationship that would otherwise be questionable.

What about sex in an intimate relationship with marriage in view? Some say they want to determine compatibility, or that for reasons of convenience they cannot get married yet but do want to express intimacy.

Once the reasons for sex in an erstwhile exclusive relationship are elucidated, one questions whether the relationship really has marriage in view.

Sex for determining compatibility makes marriage conditional. As for deciding to have sex purportedly after deciding to get married, but before the convenient moment arises, might it be seriously made in the manner one commits during the marriage moment?

Dr di Blasi points out that no one regards marriage as a mere ceremony. Even the post-modernist comes to marriage viewing it as a moment from which your entire life changes.

Even if the decision to have sex prior to marriage is made after great consideration, it is engaged in at the risk that the commitment to the permanent relationship that marriage is regarded as may never be made.

The increased frequency of divorce does not change the nature of the moment of marriage - that it involves a total mental and emotional commitment to a lifelong exclusive relationship.

So, is choosing pre-marital sex 'a big deal'?

You bet.

Would you be content with intimacy in a relationship of 'conditional and partial' love?

The writer teaches law at the National University of Singapore.